

Global Health Blog

In developing countries, one in seven girls marry before the age 15, and 38% marry before age 18. Most international conventions (including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the African Charter) define child marriage as marriage before the age of 18. It is a harmful traditional practice, a public health problem, and a violation of human rights.

Child brides are denied their right to decide for themselves when and whom to marry; they're forced to engage in sexual relations, usually with older husbands. They are robbed of their childhood, compelled to assume responsibilities and handle situations for which they are physically and psychologically unprepared. Child brides enter the institution of marriage with little or no information about their sexual and reproductive health, including contraception, safe motherhood, sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. Lacking status and power, they are often socially isolated and at increased risk of experiencing domestic violence, and many remain trapped in poverty.

Girls and young women whose bodies are not fully matured are more likely to suffer from complications related to pregnancy and childbirth. Among pregnant girls in resource-poor settings with inadequate obstetric care, a common childbirth injury is obstetric fistula. This debilitating injury causes women and girls to leak urine and/or feces uncontrollably. Usually, the baby dies. Often, the woman is shunned and/or abandoned by her family and community. Recent studies also point to physiological damages related to pregnancies among girls. For example, when a girl or a young woman is pregnant, the growth hormone she might need herself is diverted to the fetus. Also, there is evidence that the single most contributing factor to stunting is child pregnancy which, in turn, causes stunting in girls' babies.

Child marriage is associated with poor health outcomes. Girls younger than 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their 20s. In fact, girls' risk of death in pregnancy or childbirth increases five-fold if they marry at or younger than 14, compared to those who marry between the ages of 20 and 24. Babies born to girls who are younger than 14 have a 50% higher risk of dying in their first year of life compared to babies born to women in their 20s.

IntraHealth is at the forefront of efforts to curb child marriage in developing countries. Through our work with the USAID-funded Extending Service Delivery Project, led by Pathfinder International, we are helping to implement the Safe Age of Marriage Intervention in Amran Governorate, in Yemen. Yemen is among the 20 "hot spot" countries for child marriage, meaning Yemen is one of the countries with the highest child marriage prevalence. Nearly half of all Yemeni girls are married by age 17; 14% percent are married by age 14. In some rural

communities, girls as young as nine are betrothed.

Most parents who marry off their young daughters at an early age believe that their intentions are good, and religion and cultural traditions encourage this practice. Unfortunately, these parents are often unaware of the health and psychosocial consequences of child marriage. The IntraHealth-led program in Yemen works within communities to:

- * Improve local knowledge of the social and health consequences of child marriage and to encourage attitudes that favor marriage at a later age
- * Strengthen support for alternatives to child marriage, especially efforts to keep girls in school
- * Increase endorsements for delayed marriage by religious leaders and other community stakeholders.

Over the two-year span of this project, our work has shown great promise; we've noted a shift in age of marriage from 14 at the beginning of the program to approximately 18 years of age currently.

As a result of the intervention, the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Amran asked all religious leaders to disseminate messages on the health and social consequences of child marriage in their Friday sermons. Meanwhile, community members began mobilizing to build a girls' school and hire female teachers. Community members also successfully nominated a female community educator to become a school principal. In addition, 101 girls and 51 boys returned to school.

The issue of child marriage is pervasive throughout the developing world, and it undermines local and national efforts as well as those by the United States (US) Government to improve women's and girls' education, health, and economic and legal status worldwide. As a result, United States Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN), Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL) and Senator Olympia Snowe (R-ME) introduced the *International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act of 2009* (S.987/H.R. 2103). This bill would authorize US foreign assistance funding for five years to prevent child marriage in developing countries and protect girls' human rights by providing them with educational and economic opportunities.